

Daily Herald, April 14, 2004

Today, Ed Ballinger will speak to a roomful of strangers about the one subject he doesn't care to discuss: The first two hours of his shift as a flight dispatcher for United Airlines on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

The Arlington Heights resident and former United Airlines employee will meet with a sub-committee of the 9/11 commission in Washington, D.C., so panel members can decide whether his testimony warrants his appearance before the full commission.

Ballinger is there because he was in charge of United flights 175 and 93 when they crashed into the World Trade Center and a field near Shanksville, Pa.

Because perhaps, just perhaps, offering his story will calm the whispering thought that troubles him still: If he'd been told the full extent of what was unfolding sooner that morning, he might have saved Flight 93.

"I don't know what (the panel appearance) is going to be," he said Tuesday after arriving in the capital. "They want to know what I did and why. I've been told it's not finger pointing. It's just finding out what happened."

Part of what happened was his 44-year career at United crumbled after Sept. 11. He found it too hard emotionally to go on with his job as before.

Even so, Rep. Mark Kirk believes Ballinger's actions in those critical moments saved hundreds of lives.

"In my judgment, he is a vital part of the story because Ed Ballinger is the last human being to talk to (Flight 93's cockpit)," said the Wilmette Republican, whose district includes much of Arlington Heights.

"And when all is said and done, he was responsible for preventing multiple hijackings," Kirk added. "I think he probably foiled (another) hijacking."

'Beware of intrusion'

Ed Ballinger's story highlights the critical role of airline dispatchers and illustrates why they need civil service-type protections for split-second decisions they might make during future terrorist attacks, Kirk said.

Dispatchers shouldn't worry about being punished if their decisions save lives but cost their companies thousands of dollars, he said, adding he expects the 9/11 commission's final report to address this point.

"If a dispatcher warns a pilot in enough time these days, the chances of a successful hijacking go from slim to none," Kirk said.

Under federal law, dispatchers and pilots jointly control all flights that cross state lines. A pilot knows the plane's immediate environment, a dispatcher knows what's ahead.

"I have the same training as the pilot ... except the flying skills. I fly a desk, he flies the airplane," Ballinger said.

"When Sept. 11 came along, that morning, I had 16 flights taking off from the East Coast of the U.S. to the West Coast," he said. "When I sat down, these 16 flights were taking off or just getting ready to take off."

Then the first American Airlines planes struck New York and the Pentagon.

Ballinger contacted all his flights to warn them. But United Flight 175 "was not acting appropriately."

He asked Flight 175 to respond. The pilot didn't reply and Ballinger was forced to conclude he'd been compromised and that he was rogue.

By now, the situation was terribly different from previous hijackings Ballinger had handled. In two hours, he sent 122 messages.

"I was like screaming on the keyboard. I think I talked to two flights visually. The rest was all banging out short messages," he said.

Realizing what was going on, he sent all his airplanes one message: "Beware of cockpit intrusion."

"93 called me back and says, 'Hi, Ed. Confirmed.'æ"

Ballinger said he didn't wait for orders from his supervisors, or for Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta's decision to ground all flights. He immediately tried to get his pilots down on the nearest Tarmac.

"As soon as I had a grasp of what was going on ... I sent it out immediately. It was before Mineta, and even before the airlines told us to alert the crews," he said.

Dispatchers were told by superiors: Don't tell the pilots why we want them to land.

"One of the things that upset me was that they knew 45 minutes before that American Airlines had a problem. I put the story together myself (from news accounts)," Ballinger said.

"Perhaps if I had the information sooner, I might have gotten the message to 93 to bar the door."

Perhaps, but Kirk is adamant that Ballinger did save the passengers and crew of United Flight 23, which on Sept. 11 was about to depart from Newark, N.J., to Los Angeles. Kirk believes Flight 23 was going to be commandeered.

Thanks to Ballinger's quick call, the flight crew told passengers it had a mechanical problem and immediately returned to the gate.

Later, Ballinger was told six men initially wouldn't get off the plane. Later, when they did, they disappeared into the crowd, never to return. Later, authorities checked their luggage and found copies of the Qu'ran and al-Qaida instruction sheets.

"I felt good about that one," Ballinger said.

Kirk admits it's speculation, but said he believes "there are 200 people walking around today because of Ed Ballinger."

The suspect passengers were never found, and are probably still at large, Kirk said.

"When all we have is a photo from a fake ID," he added, "the chances of finding him in Afghanistan or Pakistan are rather slim."

Never the same

Ballinger said he was never the same after Sept. 11, and was reluctant to return to work.

"That first day, I'm lucky I didn't hit anyone," he said. "I drove through every red light getting home as quickly as possible. I wanted to get home and medicate myself."

At work, he started second-guessing his own decisions and became, in his words, "ultra-ultra conservative."

"I came to a point where nothing was safe enough," he recalled. "(I) couldn't even make a decision. It put you in jeopardy in every respect."

At age 63, he was told to take a medical leave and long-term disability. He said he couldn't do that. He was then asked if he could retire in six hours.

A Social Security Administration psychiatrist put him on total disability, and Christmas 2001 was a blur.

"I barely remember my retirement party. My friends tell me what a good time I had."

He's been in therapy since the attacks, and only in the last year or so can Ballinger say he has gotten his feet back down to earth. But the pain lingers.

"The stuff I'm looking at now, I haven't looked at since then," he said. "I don't want to be here, but I'd get a subpoena, so I figured what the (heck). I might as well volunteer."

As hard as it is to talk about, Ballinger said that through sharing stories about Sept. 11, we can stop it from re-happening again.

"That's what we're doing here," he said. "If we don't delve into it, it could be repeated."

Day: Man credited with saving fourth flight